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Plattsmouth Rotary February Meeting (Farmer's Day Program)

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Plattsmouth Rotary February Meeting (Farmer's Day Program)

February 14, 2001

John C. Owens

NU Vice President and IANR Vice Chancellor

Good afternoon. It's a pleasure to be with you here in Plattsmouth today, and I am "particularly pleased" to be part of your Farmer's Day program.

Because I am "so new" to Nebraska and the University of Nebraska Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, I am trying to learn as much as I can about "how" the Institute connects with the state, and "how" you feel we can be an even better partner with Nebraska. I'm curious about our work in each Nebraska county, and because I was coming to Cass County today, I asked those I work with "for some figures" on how the Institute is part of the lives of Cass Countians.

It pleases me to tell you that 23 of your college-age students are studying with us in IANR in the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources. They come from Avoca, Elmwood, Louisville, Murray, Plattsmouth, Cedar Creek, Nehawka, Eagle, Murdock and Greenwood. Those 23 students studying with us "represent" over 10 percent of the 215

students the entire University of Nebraska-Lincoln registered from Cass County last fall, and we welcome each of them. We want them to know there are a number of exciting, lucrative, compelling careers available to those interested in the food-to-table food system that we define as “agriculture” – careers in new product development, food safety, teaching, research, and so much more, as well as in the more “traditional-areas” people have “long associated” with agriculture. We care about your children in our College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources. We do our best to look out for them as they transition from living at home to supporting themselves, and to provide them with the skills they need to pursue productive, fulfilling careers and lives.

I'm going to talk “mostly” about agriculture today, as part of your Farmers Day program, but before I do I also want to emphasize the importance we place on the “N R” in IANR – natural resources. We have “six” natural resources majors students can choose from, including an environmental studies major our College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources offers “jointly” with UNL's College of Arts and Sciences.

We also offer students a joint “degree-program” working with UNL's College of Business Administration. Our agribusiness program is

recognized nationally for its innovation and quality. It's designed to meet agribusiness's need for professionals and entrepreneurs with the educational background to become successful decision-makers in the rapidly-changing agribusiness world.

In addition to the Cass County students studying with us in Lincoln, another way we are linked with Cass County is through University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension, a part of IANR. Do you all know that 4-H is a Cooperative Extension program? We sometimes find that people do not know this. Last year we had 2,588 Cass County children taking part in 4-H, many of them in more than one aspect of the 4-H program. Some are in 4-H clubs, some are part of our school-enrichment programs, and some are involved in both.

Another way we're connected with you is through the wide-ranging research we conduct in the Institute. It covers a multitude-of-topics in our focus areas of food, agriculture and agribusiness systems, natural resources, and human resources. Safe food and water – and of course, water is one of those valuable natural resources vital for Nebraska that I mentioned earlier, and a resource on which we place considerable emphasis in the Institute – value-added products, strengthened families –

and communities, and so much more are of value to people in Cass County, in Nebraska, in the United States, and, in many cases, the world. We constantly work with our constituents to help meet needs and find answers to concerns. We also constantly work with producers seeking ways to enhance profitability and to add value to existing crops, as well as with those exploring options and alternatives to Nebraska's traditional crops. I'm going to talk a little about that later.

Now, though, I'd like to say a little bit about the importance of telling agriculture's story – not just because it's agriculture's story, but because, in a way, it is everyone's story. We all eat. We all must, to sustain life.

If we've ^{EVER} been truly hungry – not because of illness or a diet or some self-imposed reason, but because we could not afford food, or there was no food available; if, in reading the paper or watching the news, we ever have been stopped by pictures of starving, haunted-eyed children with bloated bellies and match-stick-thin arms and legs, held by parents whose faces reflect the numbing pain of being unable to provide those children with the necessities of survival, we cannot help but know what a blessing it is to live in a country with a safe, affordable food, supply

~~They~~ produced by effective, efficient farmers and ranchers who comprise less than two percent of the U.S. population.

Our food is affordable. I read recently that, compared with citizens in other nations, Americans spend an average of 11 percent of their income on food. That compares with nearly 15 percent in France, nearly 25 percent in Mexico, and more than 51 percent in India.

That is so impressive. Only 11 percent of our income feeds us so well. The same article pointed out that, according to USDA statistics, if a "theoretical⁺ typical" U.S. family spent all its disposable income on food from Jan. 1 to Feb. 7, it would have bought its ^{ENTIRE} year's food supply.

That's a year's supply, earned and paid for in a little over a month. Now contrast that with those newspaper stories we see each year that give us "the date" by which the typical American has earned enough to pay the year's federal, state, and local taxes. Last year that date was May. 3.

U.S. food *is* a bargain – a safe, abundant, affordable "bargain". Think of the countries in the world who wish they could say the same.

The year 2000 Nebraska Agriculture Fact Card notes that each year "one American farmer" produces enough food for 129 people – 95 in the U.S. and 34 abroad. That "same" fact card says every dollar in agricultural

exports generates \$1.59 in economic activities such as transportation, financing, warehousing, and production. If Nebraska has \$3.5 billion in ag exports, that translates into more than \$5 billion in additional economic activity each year.

"Production agriculture contributes more than \$9 billion to Nebraska's economy each year", according to the fact card. And of every dollar spent on food, the farm value is 21 cents. "A lot of other people are making money because of the Nebraska farmer."

I grew up believing in the importance and integrity of farming and ranching. My wife Virginia and I were born and reared in the agricultural community of Plainview, on the High Plains of Texas. For decades Plainview has prided itself on being the county seat of Texas's most agriculturally productive county. Both of our mothers still live there, and my mom still farms there.

One of the reasons I chose to come to Nebraska is that being the NU Vice President of Agriculture and Natural Resources and the Harlan Vice Chancellor of IANR allows me to once again be more directly involved in agriculture. Agriculture, natural resources, and human resources – all focus areas within IANR – are absolutely critical to the

success and prosperity of this state.

I thought today I'd talk with you a little bit about two areas of IANR work you may not have heard of as much as you've heard of the work we do with Nebraska's main commodities.

The first is our Nebraska Viticulture and Small Fruits program, which has research and demonstration plots in a couple counties to your south - Otoe and Nemaha. *NEE MA HA*

While grapes aren't going to threaten corn or soybeans for acre share in the state, Paul Read, our researcher leading this program, says that a little over six years ago you would have been hard-pressed to find over 10 acres of commercial grapes in Nebraska and absolutely no commercial wineries. Today the state has approaching 300 acres and four established wineries, with several more in various stages of development.

In 1997 Read's new newsletter, *Nebraska VineLines*, had a mailing list of 45; today that list is over 460. He reports some Nebraskans have a real interest in growing grapes, especially wine grapes. A January workshop in Scottsbluff drew 160 people. Last August's Field Day in Nemaha County had over 200 in attendance.

In addition to the ^{GRAPE} research and demonstration plots in Nemaha and Otoe counties that I mentioned earlier, others are established in Pawnee, Lancaster, and Scotts Bluff counties. Our researcher ^{cooperates} with the Nebraska Wineries and Grape Growers Association, extension educators, and ^{commercial-growers} in his research and educational programming. While the ^{primary focus} is on grape culture, he tells me several other fruits also are being studied – Asian and conventional pears, plums, cherries, blackberries, raspberries, currants, and gooseberries. He has 65 genotypes of grapes on trial, and several ^{each} of the other fruits. He's investigating cultural practices, including weed management, pruning and vine management, trellising practices, fertilizing, winter hardiness, and rootstock influences on grapevine performance.

Nebraska's dairy industry is ^{the other area} I thought I'd talk briefly about today. Cass and neighboring counties certainly have dairies; are you ^{aware} of the dairy industry growth occurring in Nebraska?

When people ^{think} of cattle in Nebraska they're likely to think beef, yet Jeff Keown, ^{QUEEN} dairy specialist in IANR, tells me the dairy industry showed a 5 percent increase in cow numbers in the past year, which comes ^{on top} of similar increases for the past three years. This increase

has stopped a 30-year decline in Nebraska dairy cow numbers; today there are over 80,000 dairy cows in the state.

Our specialist says this increase can be attributed to two things. The one you've perhaps read about in the paper – there is an increase in people from other areas of the country moving their dairies to Nebraska. That's because of water availability; the fact that feed costs are 30 percent below the national average here; by-product feeds are available, especially those from the ethanol industry; electricity rates are better – 40 percent lower than California, for example; Nebraska has a well-educated work force, and a public-education-system people in other parts of the country envy.

Those dairies coming into Nebraska seem to have received the most publicity, but our specialist tells me one of the real keys to the growth of Nebraska's dairy industry is that current Nebraska dairy producers are expanding. He estimates 60 percent of Nebraska's dairy-industry growth in the past three years is homegrown.

Because growth in the dairy industry means more dairy managers are needed, our University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension is working with Northeast Community College in Norfolk on a Dairy Certification —

Program to fill what we anticipate will be a need for 300-400 new dairy employees over the next five years.

Northeast Community College offers courses to give students the basic scientific background they need to work on more specialized learning modules prepared by NU Cooperative Extension. Extension will arrange a three-month internship for enrolled students so they gain hands-on dairy experience. We in the Institute also are working with Northeast Community College to add dairy emphasis to existing NECC course offerings.

When someone asks me what I think IANR's part is in Nebraska's agriculture, I say we are partners with it. We are constantly seeking ways to meet the needs of Nebraska agriculture, and to strengthen it. Issues facing agriculture today are complex; I wish I had easy answers, but I do not. What I do have is a true belief that it is important for both rural and urban Nebraskans that we find solutions to agriculture's concerns. I also believe in Nebraska's agricultural producers, and in IANR's commitment to work with them to meet their needs. Agriculture is important to Nebraska. One in four Nebraska jobs is related to it.

As I learn more about Nebraska I hope you will let me know the

work you believe IANR must do to help meet Nebraska's needs and to help make Nebraska's dreams come true. I am excited by the work we currently are doing; I know there is so much yet to do. I look forward to being part of all of it with high anticipation and a great deal of enthusiasm.

Thank you!